



Multiversal Queerbaiting

Alan Scott, Alternate Universes and Gay Characters in Superhero Comics

Bagger, Christoffer

Published in:
Queerbaiting and Fandom

Publication date:
2019

Document version
Version created as part of publication process; publisher's layout; not normally made publicly available

Citation for published version (APA):
Bagger, C. (2019). Multiversal Queerbaiting: Alan Scott, Alternate Universes and Gay Characters in Superhero Comics . In J. Brennan (Ed.), *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans through Homoerotic Possibilities* (pp. 171-176). University of Iowa Press. Fandom & culture

MULTIVERSAL QUEERBAITING ALAN SCOTT, ALTERNATE UNIVERSES, AND GAY CHARACTERS IN SUPERHERO COMICS

.....
CHRISTOFFER BAGGER

A famous comic book superhero came out as gay in 2012. He had been operating since 1940, was a long-standing member of the publisher DC's roster of costumed adventurers, and had even gotten a feature film bearing his name only a year previously. Even though all noted is true, I argue that this was still a case of queerbaiting, where the publisher teased the queering of a major superhero but only delivered on a fringe representation in a manner particular to the genre trappings of American superhero comics. The newly queered character—who was a version of the character Alan Scott, bearing the superhero name Green Lantern—existed in an “alternate universe” separate from the majority of the narrative and titles of DC's comics. This thought piece will contribute to the field of queerbaiting research by building on an understanding of queerbaiting as a teasing, yet ultimate denial, of queer representation. In other words, these characters are excluded from the “actual”¹ or “canonical”² of a given text. My argument is that, due to the particularities of alternate universes in American superhero comics, an exclusion from the “actual” often takes place. While this is not a total exclusion, as is often discussed within the current discourse of queerbaiting, it is a degree of it.³ In these cases, even when representation is ultimately provided, it may be in a marginal form that has little impact upon the “canonical” or “actual” image of a popular character. Queer readings and content have often been marginalized in discussions of American superhero comics, and it is thus worth considering closely how queer representation is ultimately delivered or not delivered. This is an especially worthwhile discussion in superhero comics, given how alternate universes are a common feature within the genre.

Back in 2012, rumors swirled that a member of DC's prominent roster of superheroes was going to come out as gay, or rather be reimaged as a gay character. This was in conjunction with a line-wide relaunch of all their titles, an initiative branded *The New 52*. The most popular subjects of speculation by major news outlets were (perhaps unsurprisingly) the publisher's most well-known characters: Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. The rampant speculation about the identity of the soon-to-be-outed gay character was very likely intended as a tool for publicity. Some speculation, for instance, noted the fortuitous timing of DC making this announcement and rival publisher Marvel

announcing the marriage of their own prominent gay superhero, Northstar. One blog post gave a particularly prescient piece of speculation on the eventual identity of DC's soon-to-be-outed hero: "They'll probably cop out and make it some second stringer . . . I hope they make Earth-2 [sic] Superman gay or something, so we watch the inevitable shitstorm when Fox News doesn't understand the concept of parallel universes."⁴

The eventual reveal was less prominent than Superman, though otherwise quite on the money. The man in question was Alan Scott, the alter ego of superhero the Green Lantern. However, this was not, strictly speaking, the "golden age" Alan Scott that readers might have been familiar with through years of reading comics. It was not even an iteration of the character Hal Jordan, who bore the same superhero moniker in the then-recent cinematic outing *Green Lantern* (2011). Instead, it was a reimagining of the original Alan Scott character who resided in an "alternate universe" (designated "Earth 2") separate from the shared reality in which most of DC's titles at that time played out. The "old" or "golden age" Alan Scott was a heterosexual World War II veteran turned superhero, who would eventually go on to father two children who would in turn become costumed adventurers themselves. The new Alan Scott of Earth 2 was a young media mogul, who on a trip to China loses his boyfriend, Sam, in a train wreck. Scott is then infused with the powers of "The Green," a mystical energy that transforms Sam's engagement ring (Scott had planned to propose to his partner before his untimely death) into a magical ring which channels Scott's newly gained magical powers.⁵

The discussion of queer content in comics has a troubled history. Perhaps the most infamous work on this subject is Frederic Wertham's controversial treatise *Seduction of the Innocent*, which led a moral outrage against alleged homosexual content in the pages of mainstream comic books.⁶ Even newer scholarly works seem keen to erase any meaningful discussions of queer content in superhero comics. Danny Fingeroth's *Superman on the Couch*, for instance, only entertains the notion of a romantic relationship between superheroes Batman and Robin as born out of misguided discussion of "gay brainwashing" and against the intent of the original authors of the characters.⁷ Thus, readings that emphasize queer content or subtext in comic books are often dismissed as less valid. This runs counter to the understanding of queer readings put forward by Alexander Doty, who emphasizes that such readings "aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful or wilful misreadings, or 'reading too much into things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audience all along."⁸ If we accept the premise that queer readings of characters are not to be automatically considered as "alternatives" to "actual" readings, then it is worth considering

more closely the implications of presenting queer reinventions of characters in alternate universes.

Alternate universes are a narrative construction often used in American superhero comics, and by DC in particular. Originally used to rationalize accidentally contradictory versions of the superhero the Flash, they have since become a mainstay and a fertile ground for experimentation with well-known characters and story world elements.⁹ Significantly, and perhaps rather problematically in this case, these alternate universes exist as fringes and oppositions to the well-established “consistent cores” of famous characters.¹⁰ The so-called “many worlds hypothesis” is often invoked when discussing alternate universes within fiction. While this theory does not intrinsically propose any hierarchical ordering of diverging worlds and time lines in the world of the fiction, this does not prevent such an ordering from emerging in the world of the readers.¹¹ As Marie-Laure Ryan has discussed, works of fiction and narrative theory itself will often stress the contrast between the actual and the merely possible.¹² Single narratives featuring multiple contradictory time lines and universes will often establish some hierarchy between these, enclosing alternate time lines in a frame story that “subsequently returns the reader to the previously established continuity”¹³ or otherwise positioning one as more “true” than the other.¹⁴

In the sprawling world(s) of superhero comics, there is usually a “master narrative.”¹⁵ This master narrative plays out in the “main” fictional universe in which the characters and ongoing storylines most audiences will care about live. It is a “recurring feature of these stories [that they] traverse the multi-verse and cross the liminal boundaries between worlds.”¹⁶ However, strict separation and self-containment of new story worlds are just as likely. This particular iteration of Earth 2 occasionally exchanged characters with its mainstream counterpart, but it was mostly separate from the master narrative. Its ontological and hierarchical status was thus secondary to the master narrative, if the numbering didn’t already make it clear. The reading of homosexual content in works of art or fiction is often discussed with a distinction between “the suggested” and “the actual.”¹⁷ In other words, a clear demarcation between latent and manifest content (as well as the boundaries between the homosexual and the homosocial) are often implied and policed. Similarly, while characters inhabiting different worlds may occasionally cross over with each other, more often than not the lines are clearly demarcated and policed both inside and outside the world(s) of the fiction itself.

Alternate universes have a radical potential to reimagine familiar characters. This includes the potential of bringing any suggested or even nonexistent homosexual subtext into the actual of an alternate world. If authorial intent is

taken as a measuring stick (as, for instance, Fingerroth does), this content is certainly more actual than queer readings or queer fan fiction. However, pretending that the reimagining of a character's sexual orientation in an alternate universe is as meaningful as changing the canonical or actual character's sexual orientation is ultimately disingenuous. To demonstrate: Even though all these alternate universe reimaginings exist, few people are likely to primarily think of Batman as a Victorian-era engineer¹⁸ or Superman as an African American politician¹⁹ or Spider-Man as a gun-toting film noir-style gumshoe.²⁰

Significantly different interpretations of characters rarely usurp their initial characterizations, at least in the general imagination. It is an exaggeration to say, as Umberto Eco implies in his essay "The Myth of Superman," that superheroes are ultimately static figures incapable of any significant change.²¹ Even so, there often seems to be a limit to how much a character can diverge from their previously established "consistent core." It seems that a hierarchical ordering of fictional universes and characters is, if not inevitable, then at least hard to avoid. This adds a further problematic element to the idea of representation of traditionally underrepresented groups. If this representation primarily takes place in fictional universes separate from the master narrative, then it will likely have limited impact on the overall visibility and public consciousness of a character. This is not to say that no potential to destabilize that master narrative exists within these alternate universes. Nonetheless, at face value a gay Green Lantern in an alternate universe is as prioritized by the story world as a Stalinist Superman in an alternate universe is.²² A fictional world cannot ultimately displace the real one to which it owes its existence.²³ Similarly, fictional worlds existing as derivatives of other fictional worlds seem even less capable of displacing the original worlds to which they owe their existence. The "original" fictional worlds are likely to persist in publication. The worlds derived from these are not always so fortunate.

In this particular case, the Earth 2 of Alan Scott was first destroyed in 2015, had a brief resurrection from 2015 to 2017 in the series *Earth 2: Society*,²⁴ and then was finally discontinued in publishing. This particular Alan Scott, his Earth, and his Justice Society disappeared from the pages of DC's comics, seemingly to make room for a return to their original "golden age" incarnations.²⁵ This particular case highlights the expendability of alternate universes and, by extension, the reinventions of characters that live in them. Canonical characters, like the golden age Alan Scott, are likely to persist. Even if they are erased, they often make a comeback. As Eve Ng suggests, the crucial element of queerbaiting is not necessarily "a lack of canonicity, but how satisfactorily queerness plays out in the canonical text relative to viewer expectations that

emerge from the reading of multiple texts and paratexts and that take account of queer contextuality.”²⁶ A reimagining of a major character’s sexual orientation was hinted, while the eventual reveal was that it was a mere fringe character whose sexual orientation was changed. This view was certainly present in some reactions, with one commentator remarking that Scott, and this version of him in particular, was not so much a second-tier character as “more like *cough* 45th-tier.”²⁷ This is not to say that Alan Scott was not received positively as a character but that comic bloggers and reviewers were very conscious of his placement in an alternate universe.

In the same text in which he discusses the phenomenon of the master narrative in multiversal comic books, William Proctor also concedes that the holding of any one version of a character as the definitive one “depends in large part on the position of the reader.”²⁸ While this conclusion would seem to contradict the concept of master narratives, it highlights the malleability of these works and the potential for any given reader’s experience to be taken seriously. After all, whether or not he belongs in the second or the forty-fifth tier, this Alan Scott was for a while the only Alan Scott in existence, a fact that was noted with some pleasure by at least one reviewer.²⁹ Any particular fan may position themselves in relation to the work in such a way that they will emphasize any particular character; this is, however, not the same as that character necessarily being prioritized by the construction of the story world. Yet a glimmer of hope shines through, as it often does in superhero narratives. American superhero comics are notorious for being influenced by their fans and even eventually accepting a select number of them into the ranks of their writers, artists, and editors. They may then incorporate such characters that influenced them into their own stories. Only time will tell whether this will one day happen, if not this Alan Scott, then for another queer hero.

Queer representation in recent American superhero comic books has come about with a *modus operandi* of queering alternate universe reinventions of characters and not their canon counterparts.³⁰ While these representations are certainly more actual than suggested, they are still marginalized in many ways, arguably providing a less than fully fledged form of representation. The multiple iterations of characters within fantastical and speculative fiction in a particular world afford many scholarly avenues yet to be fully explored in terms of representation. In the case of Alan Scott, while he was for several years the “only” Alan Scott in existence, he was ultimately situated in a world separate from the master narrative, a world that was ultimately deemed expendable by both publisher and powers within the text. Therefore, I argue that the overestimation of the queering of alternate, as opposed to canonical, characters—and

pretending this will have a similar impact as canonical queering—is a form of queerbaiting on the part of a publisher. A certain visibility and prominence are promised yet ultimately not delivered on. While this does not invalidate positive fan responses to a gay Alan Scott and his particular version of Earth, it does highlight the disingenuous nature of a publisher overestimating the impact of placing newly outed characters in alternate universes.